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ABSTRACT

New York State has the fifth highest dropout rate in the United States. Between 1980 and 1984 the dropout rate ranged between 32.8 percent and 34 percent. During the 1980-81 school year alone, over half (53 percent) of black high school students dropped out of school. Several approaches have been tried to decrease numbers of dropouts. This report reviews reasons students drop out and discusses dropout prevention efforts in New York State and their effectiveness. In general, findings show that inadequate planning is one of the main problems hampering program effectiveness. The following suggestions are made for dealing with the dropout problem: (1) ways must be found to involve parents more actively in the education of their children; (2) a long-term or longitudinal study of program effectiveness is required; (3) dropout programs should be considered long-term efforts to improve the quality of schooling; (4) community organizations can deliver many services better than the schools do; (5) state and local agencies must facilitate business and school collaboration; and (6) a learning plan should be developed for each student who is at risk. (PS)

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Notes Concerning Dropout Prevention in New York State

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INTRODUCTION

Dropout prevention in New York State, as elsewhere has become a high growth activity. Several commissions and task forces have recently developed reports concerning the problem of early school leaving as it impacts on New York's minority communities. Most notable among these is the report of the Task Force on the New York State Dropout problem (New York State African American Institute), a document which goes beyond statistics on the problem and attempts to examine the overall effects of poor schooling experiences on people of color.

The purpose of this paper is to review the problem of early school leaving in the context of New York State, including current publicly-supported dropout prevention efforts. An underlying assumption here is that efforts to increase school completions can not be effectively undertaken in isolation from the overall educational process.

According to the Current Population Survey of the Department of Labor, for the past 10 years, the dropout rate for youth 16--24 has remained roughly the same -- about 13-14 percent (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1986). However, among African Americans, there has actually been an increase in school completions according to the same report.

These figures belie the nature and extent of the problem of early school leaving (or dropping out) and the disastrous impact of the problem not only upon individual lives but also on society. While the issue of school completions has received considerable attention, analyses of the problem as well as approaches to solutions have often been characterized by misunderstanding and confusion. For example, the New York State Education Department has defined a dropout as "any pupil who left school prior to graduation for any reason except death and did not enter another school or high school equivalency program" (New York State Education Department, 1986). This seemingly straightforward definition, when applied by six different local educational agencies would probably yield six completely different sets of dropout data. Districts differ widely in the methods used to generate information on dropouts. Various policies exclude students who should under the State definition be considered dropouts from being counted as such. Some local policies allow students over age 16 to voluntarily leave school or allow youth who are over the age of 17 to be involuntarily discharged from school.

In addition, attempts to view the dropout rate in its historical context do not place the appropriate emphasis on the changing nature of the workplace. Twenty years ago, a person who left high school prior to graduation could reasonably expect to make a decent living as a result of "blue collar" employment, particularly in heavy industry. With the transition of the American economy to a service and information base, many of these "blue collar" jobs have disappeared and in their wake, new "opportunities" have opened in such areas as

the fast food industry, retail stores and other low-paying employment.

New York State has the fifth highest dropout rate in the U.S. (U.S. News and World Report, June 3, 1985). Between 1980 and 1984 the dropout rate ranged between 32.8% and 34%. During the 1980-81 school year alone, over one-half (53%) of African American high school students dropped out of school (Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, 1986).

It is clear that in New York State as elsewhere, a myriad of approaches are being tried. Too often these approaches appear to be uncoordinated and disjointed. Beyond the catalog of programs, it is necessary to take a hard look at the nature of schooling. Several questions emerge. "Should school be viewed as a holding pen?" "Should efforts to keep students in school be placed in the larger context of school experiences?" "How well prepared are teachers to teach students from backgrounds usually markedly different from their own?"

It can be reasonably assumed that the decision to leave school is based on what is from the student's point of view a rational response to personal and environmental factors.

> What is involved in the choice to persist or dropout? Fundamentally, whether a student chooses to stay in school depends upon (1) his or her degree of satisfaction and (2) whether he or she thinks that there is an alternative which would be more satisfying. Students make choices on the basis of a kind of cost/benefit analysis of perceived alternatives with an aim of maximizing personal satisfaction (Barr, 1985, p.23).

The reasons why students drop out of school are often explained under three broad categories: (1) in-school factors; (2) family factors; and (3) work/economic factors. The "High School and Beyond" (Peng, 1985) survey data showed that the reason given most frequently by males for dropping out of school was poor academic achievement (36%). Next came a dislike for school (35%). Females cited marriage or marriage plans most frequently, followed by a dislike for school (31%) and poor grades (30%).

More often than not, in-school academic failure is given as a major cause for the dropout crisis without any regard for in-school subfactors that are associated with organizational structure (i.e., school climate, school community linkages, conditions of school facilities); management style (i.e., school governance-policies and practices, staff attitudes and teaching methodology) and curriculum content and instruction. In this regard, few states have developed a comprehensive approach that adequately responds to the three broad categories (in-school factors, family factors, and economic factors) of reasons why students leave school (Jones, 1986). Family factors and to a lesser degree economic factors are usually the areas of emphasis addressed by dropout prevention programs. the Task Force on the New York State Dropout Problem underscores the significance of in-school factors in "pushing students out" of school:

> Closely related to the reality of personal and cultural dehumanization is the process of academic humiliation. Children of color are stereotyped as being slow learners, deprived or standard English deficient, are not taught, and not surprisingly, do not learn. Low expectations for children who

> come from groups of low esteem result in low levels of teaching and learning. Thus, the prophecy is fulfilled: children not expected to learn and poorly taught do not learn. And yet urban classrooms are filled with such children who suffer the dread of recitation, the agony of unsolved math problems and the embarassment of being shown up by classmates who achieve in spite of their own victimization.

While a growing body of research literature has documented many of the reasons why students leave school before graduation, the data have been less clear regarding generalizable factors and practices that contribute to school persistence. Factors and practices cited in the literature include

- o success in school and a student's perception of his or her ability to succeed in school.
- o the feeling by a student that he or she is a part of the school; involvment in extracurricular activities.
- o the establishment of a clear connection between education and future plans, including employment.
- o the postponement of parenting.
- o limiting the number of hours worked in part time employment.
- o limiting school and class size.
- o the "effective schools" elements of high expectations, a sense of mission, strong building leadership, frequent monitoring of student progress, a positive learning environment.
- o understanding and valuing diverse student cultural backgrounds.

In a critical analysis of AI/DP that was conducted by the Public Education Association (1985), the authors wrote

While adolescents have manifold problems, many leave school because of the nature of school itself. They haven't learned very much there and their relationships with teachers and other students is unsatisfying.

Research has suggested the value of specific characteristics in promoting effective scools. To the extent that these factors have been demonstrated as impacting positively on the academic performance of students, particularly at-risk students, these factors should be incorporated into dropout prevention efforts. The issue is not only keeping students in school but also maximizing opportunities for learning.

More money in itself will not solve the dropout problem. The problem requires coordinated effort and comprehensive planning encompassing the entire school program. What's more, the various levels of education, elementary, secondary, and higher education, each of which has traditionally operated in relative isolation, will need to work in concert to improve the entire educational pipeline. Recent initiatives including the Stay in School Partnership Program, joining higher education and elementary and secondary schools are encouraging but are only a first step.

Following is a brief review of dropout prevention efforts in New York State.

ATTENDANCE IMPROVEMENT AND DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAM (AI/DP)

AI/DP was funded by the State Legislature in 1984 to improve attendance, prevent dropping out and to improve student attitudes toward school. For the first year of the program (1984-85 school year), $28 million was appropriated for AI/DP programs serving students in grades k-12. The funds were reserved for districts whose attendance rates in 1982-83 were below 92.85% (the lowest 10% of all districts). The appropriation was disbursed by formula to 70 districts (67 upstate school districts, 28 New York City community school districts, and 2 New York City Board of Education divisions -- high school and special education). Overall, a total of 26 high schools and 68 middle schools received AI/DP funds.

For the 1985-86 school year, funding was sustained at the original level. Two major changes were enacted. In each school district money could be used only in those buildings with attendance rates below the median rate for the district. Also, at least one-half of a district's appropriation had to be spent for programs and services in buildings which include the two grades prior to high school. According to the AI/DP Interim Report (State Education Department, March 1986), grants to upstate districts totaled nearly 20% of the total appropriation and funded programs serving approximately 79,032 students. The most frequently cited program category of service was in the area of counseling. During the same period, New York City received approximately three-fourths of the total appropriation to serve close to 28,500 students. Counseling services was the most frequently cited service category.

According to the interim report, first year evaluations reported improved attendance rates in 88.6% of those districts receiving AI/DP funds (compared to attendance rates of the previous year). Interim report data for the second year indicate that 82.7% of the districts receiving funds have experienced improvements in the attendance rate for target population students. The report also mentions the following problems:

- o upstate districts experienced problems around parent communication and the lack of time available to work with students.
- o New York City concerns focused on implementation issues since the program structure set forth in guidelines was new to most participating districts.

Finally, the interim report recommended:

- o The revision of AI/DP legislation to require funding of programs in low performing CAR schools.
- o The inclusion of additional allocation for SED administrative purposes.
- o The increase of the span of project approval from one year to three years.
- o The addition of a requirement for staff development workshops as part of each project.

Currently, AI/DP is in its third year of funding. The present guidelines require that six components be part of every program:

- o Facilitating services to students
- o Attendance Outreach
- o Guidance and Counseling Services
- o Health Services
- o School Level Linkages
- o Alternative Education Programs

In addition, several supplemental programs are authorized:

- o Hotel Extended Day Program (services to students sheltered in

hotels

- o Comprehensive Outreach and Coordination (coordinate services for students in temporary housing)
- o Pregnant and Parenting Teens Program
- o Central Placement Unit (placement, coordination and followup services for out of school youth referred through family court)
- o Job Development Program
- o Elementary Model Program
- o Special Education Programs

NEW YORK STATE STAY IN SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM (SSPP)

Section 1 of Chapter 53 of the Laws of 1986 appropriates $1.5 million to provide support services and compensatory activities related to attendance improvement/dropout prevention for pupils in public schools identified as having a high risk of truancy, dropping out, or academic failure. The program is intended to provide support targeted to schools that are eligible for AI/DP programs and services. AI/DP schools identified by the Comprehensive Assessment Reports as being in need of improvement are specifically targeted for support.

SSPP is designed to bring about cooperation between institutions of higher education and nearby public school districts. Emphasis is placed on joint college or university/local educational agency planning and development of projects. Authorized activities include (1) developing model programs which provide student support services and compensatory activities; (2) identifying, assessing. and providing services to motivate and encourage students to stay in school; (3) developing curriculum materials for use in remedial, developmental,

and compensatory activities; (4) planning and implementing inservice training for teachers, administrators and counselors; and (5) evaluating and disseminating model programs throughout the State.

Ten awards were made for the 1986-87 school year to the following: State University of New York (SUNY), College at Buffalo; Nazareth College (Rochester); SUNY-Binghamton; SUNY-Albany; New York University; City College of New York; Brooklyn College; Fordham University (New York); and Pace University (New York).

DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAM (DPP)

The DPP was implemented by the New York City Board of Education in 1985 in 10 high schools and 29 middle schools. The goals of the program (which was funded by the Office of the Mayor and the Board of Education) are to improve attendance and to prevent dropping out. At the time of implementation, DPP consisted of (1) attendance improvement outreach and incentives consisting of tee shirts, calculators, field trips, etc.; (2) guidance and counseling; (3) health services; (4) transitional programs; (5) alternative programs; and (6) increased school security. Each of the ten DPP high schools received between $150,000 -- $800,000 depending on the need and size of the school, while each middle school received an average of $150,000. Total funding for DPP was approximately $6 million. DPP schools were allowed to choose from among three program models

- o systemic management model: whereby all students receive services provided by the school

- o case management model: whereby targeted at-risk students receive services provided by the school and in some cases by community based organizations
- o modified model: whereby elements of both models are combined

The program also provided schools with an option to involve community-based organizations in the delivery of services. By the middle of the first year of implementation (January 1986) the program had been fully implemented. Prior to the second year of funding, DPP was revised in several major ways. First, in an effort to better coordinate the two major dropout prevention programs, the City required DPP-funded programs to provide six program components previously applicable only to AI/DP programs (see section on AI/DP). In addition, the following changes were made: (1) student eligibility criteria were expanded; (2) in districts with four or more selected schools, a new position, Staff Development Specialist, was authorized; (3) summer programs for students who participated (or were eligible to participate) in AI/DP or DPP in 1985-86 and whose attendance improved were offered "transitional" program services to help them sustain their improvement; (5) high schools were required to submit plans for linkage with at least three eligible middle schools; (6) a pilot program was developed in appropriate middle schools integrating the general education and special education dropout prevention programs; and (7) a pilot program for long-term absences was planned.

Two recent reports evaluate the effectiveness of the City's dropout prevention efforts. The first, "Effective Dropout Prevention: An Analysis of the 1985-86 Program in New York City" (Public Education Association, 1986) assesses the City's implementation of programs funded by DPP and AI/DP. The second "Evaluation of the New York City

Dropout Prevention Initiative" (Teachers College, Columbia University, 1986) focuses on the city-funded DPP.

New York City received $21.5 million to operate AI/DP programs during the 1985-86 school year. The program was active in 26 high schools and 68 middle schools. On the high school level, the emphasis of AI/DP programs was on restructuring classroom learning. The middle school AI/DP program focused on incorporating external supportive activities to support the regular classroom experiences (PEA, page 5). According to the PEA report, each of the AI/DP and DPP middle schools receive $150,000 to serve 150 students (1985-86). To be eligible for the program students had to have been absent 15 or more days in the spring of 1985 or 30 or more days in the 1984-85 school year. AI/DP high schools also served 150 students (average of $200,000 per school). The eligibility requirement was absences of at least 20 days during the spring of 1985 or 30 or more days in the 1984-85 school year. DPP high schools were funded based on the size of the school and extent of need. Eligibility was based on absence of 25 or more days during spring 1985 or more than 10 days in each of the first two months of 1986.

PEA found the following problems:

- implementation in middle schools was most ineffective when program design required staff collaboration without necessary time for staff planning
- schools encountered problems in collaborating with community based organizations due to inadequate facilitation by the Board of Education
- much needed to be done to strengthen the academic learning component of DPP programs

- o labeling of students played a negative role in middle school programs due to "pull-out"
- o parent involvement was consistently lacking in DPP and AI/DP programs
- o school size, lack of space, large proportions of below-grade level students and the large array of available academic programs were cited as obstacles to dropout prevention

The PEA report called for 1) continued emphasis on the most at-risk students; 2) followup of students after the first year of participation; 3) more attention to LEP students; 4) increased planning in middle schools; 5) ongoing staff development; 6) a strong initiative to facilitate contractual agreements with CBOs; 7) alleviation of overcrowiding in target schools; 8) strengthening the academic component of DPP high school programs; 9) minimizing unecessary tracking; 10) increased attention to program design in middle schools; 11) development of alternative models of parent participation; and 12) dropout prevention in concert with general school improvement.

The Teachers College study examined implementation of dropout prevention efforts in 13 high schools and 29 middle schools serving a total of 10,400 students. The study also found delayed contracting with community based organizations to be a major problem. Differences in orientation between community based organization staff and Board of Education staff was also cited as a problem in implementing DPP. In addition, with a few exceptions, linkages between middle schools and high schools were generally unsuccessful, health services varied greatly as well as the commitment of the DPP staff to supplement these services. DPP high schools implemented three models of service

delivery. Three schools adopted programs designed to impact on atrisk as well as other students (systemic), three schools combined a systemic approach with a case management approach using services provided by community based organizatins, four schools used more extensive case management services for targeted students plus the basic school-based allocations, and the remaining three schools used the latter approach though with much smaller school-based allocations.

All schools experienced start-up problems as a result of contract delays, problems of space,and problems with establishing working relationships with community based organizations. The attendance of targeted students also declined over the program period. (Note that The New York Times, May 22, 1986 reported a 0.8% increase in attendance attributable to DPP).

CONCLUSION

Early evidence of dropout prevention efforts in New York State demonstrates the complexity of the problem and the difficulty that lies ahead in our efforts to address the problem. Several major concerns have emerged. Ways must be found to involve parents more actively in the education of their children. The multiplicity of approaches requires a long-term or longitudinal approach to studying the efficacy of State and local effort. Dropout prevention efforts should not be viewed as interim, short-term solutions but should be viewed in the context of long-term efforts to improve the quality of schooling. Also, it is clear that community-based organizations can play an important role in delivering many services better than these services

could be delivered by the schools; however, developing school-community linkage has not been a painless process. State and local education agencies will have to play a more central role in facilitating these linkages.

A major consideration that emerges from early attempts to assess the effectiveness of dropout prevention efforts is the general inadequacy of planning. More often than not, dropout prevention programs cite the lack of planning time and planning assistance as major impediments to program implementation. Planning is often conducted outside the context of the total learning environment. Dropout prevention can not be viewed in isolation from the curriculum and overall instructional delivery. Schools need to follow an expanded version of the approach taken by Rochester, New York high schools in which a learning plan is developed for each student considered to be at-risk. We cannot afford to wait until high school to intervene in the academic lives of our young people. Intervention must be targeted to those who manifest learning problems early in their academic career.

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